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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4591
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0877
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9652
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4157
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1613
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3339
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6748
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4363
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0746
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0747
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0400
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2678
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0322
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000698

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/25/2016
TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINS PREF BM
SUBJECT: NORTH KAREN STATE - WHERE DO YOU RUN?

REF: A. RANGOON 624

1B. RANGOON 591

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Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: A Rangoon-based Karen contact who recently visited Taungoo discussed security conditions in nearby Karen State. Fighting erupted in northern Karen State in early 2006 after the Burmese army started moving into traditional Karen-controlled areas. Authorities established a food embargo that has caused serious food shortages in northern Karen State. Karen villagers reportedly fled "hundreds" of small villages, which the Burmese army then torched. Other village populations have sought refuge in Burmese towns and communities. Taungoo sources claim over 100 Burmese army soldiers have died in fighting with Karen insurgents (specifically the KNLA's 2nd Brigade) since January. END SUMMARY.

WHO STARTED IT?

12. (C) Rebecca Htin (PROTECT), a Rangoon-based Karen medical doctor and development worker, returned from a fact-finding visit to Taungoo, Bago Division. Saw Ka Thwee (PROTECT), a Taungoo Karen elder familiar with local conditions briefed her on security issues in the region. According to the Karen elder, following the GOB move to Pyinmana in November-December 2005, the Burmese army sent 2,000 troops to the Taungoo area in early 2006. First, the army moved supplies and rations to forward bases close to areas where the Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA) 2nd Brigade operates. (Note: The KNLA is the military arm of the Karen National Union (KNU). End Note.) The 2nd Brigade commander ordered his soldiers to "follow" the Burmese forces who had delivered the supplies. The Karen caught up with them about eighteen miles east of Taungoo and ambushed a Burmese patrol.

After several Burmese troops died, the Burmese commander ordered his men to "clear out" Karen villages in the area that he believed supported the KNLA.

¶13. (C) The mountainous terrain in northern Karen State cannot support large villages, so most villages have no more than 40 households. According to Karen contacts, the Burmese army reportedly chased Karen out of "hundreds" of small villages in areas where the KNLA traditionally operated, and then they torched them. Many villagers fled eastward toward Thailand with whatever they could carry. Some entered Thailand and are now in refugee camps, but the majority remained in the jungle or were camping near the Thai border. It is not clear, according to Karen sources, if they prefer to wait to see if they can return to their former lands after the monsoon rains set in, or if Thai authorities have prevented them from crossing the Salween River into Thailand.

NOT EVERYBODY RAN EAST

¶14. (C) Not all the Karen villagers are moving toward Thailand. According to Rebecca Htin, local authorities ordered Karen from larger villages located close to roads under Burmese control to move to Taungoo or to Thandaung, Karen State. The Burmese army commanders, however, would prefer that these villagers return to their own homes, because they now have nobody to provide forced labor for the army. Other villagers moved south towards Hpapun, Karen State, where they settled among Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) ceasefire group communities. Others fled northeast toward Kayah State to shelter among a small Karen ceasefire group. Several families reportedly sought refuge at a Seventh-day Adventist school compound at Kyauk Taing, seven miles east of Taungoo. Dr. Rebecca is trying to collect data on the numbers of displaced persons in Taungoo, Thandaung, and Hpapun, but most of the displaced persons have

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moved in with relatives or friends and remain "invisible."

FOUR CUTS ALL OVER AGAIN

¶15. (C) Rebecca Htin recalled former Burmese dictator Ne Win's infamous "Four Cuts" program to isolate insurgents and their sympathizers. She said that the military and local authorities have banned the transport of rice, fish paste, salt, and chilies beyond the "mile 10" check post on the main (and only) highway going east from Taungoo (ref A). Saw Ka Thwee has tried to mediate with the Burmese army and the KNLA. He received permission to take one truckload of rice past the checkpoint to help Karen villagers who had run out of food and he noted that villagers could sometimes bribe personnel at the checkpoints to allow small supplies of food to pass. Burmese troops reportedly profit from the food shortages in Karen villages by selling their own rice stocks.

REMOTE-CONTROL WARFARE

¶16. (C) Saw Ka Thwee says he also managed to convince local KNLA commanders, who claim they were only defending Karen villagers, to "back off." However, Saw Ka Thwee is not sure the KNLA fully trusts him because he also talks to the Burmese army and local Burmese authorities. According to a leader of the Thandaung Peace Group ceasefire group (PROTECT) familiar with guerrilla warfare, the Burmese army and the KNLA in northern Karen State have engaged in few head-to-head fights, preferring instead to conduct "mine warfare." He claimed that Burmese landmines have Chinese and Indian markings, whereas the Karen use homemade devices that they can explode remotely. He also claimed that the Burmese army has lost over 100 troops in the area since the beginning of ¶2006. (Note: The casualty claims could be inflated, given the report of few "head-to-head" battles. End Note.)

HERE FOR THE LONG HAUL

¶7. (C) COMMENT: The Burmese army appears determined to exert more control in northern Karen State where the KNU formerly held influence and to provide a security zone around the new capital and the route between Pyinmana and Rangoon. If the embargo on the transport of food supplies to the area remains, it could result in permanent displacement of many traditional Karen communities, just as Ne Win's "four cuts" policy did in the past. Signs of major road building near Taungoo (ref A) could indicate plans to build all-weather roads into KNLA-controlled territory to enable the Burmese army to maintain a year-round presence in northern Karen State, in addition to offering better access to Thailand from the new capital Pyinmana. END COMMENT.

VILLAROSA